

Photographesomenonic Sinofuturism(s)

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OUR increasingly globalized and increasingly technologicized world seems to indicate that “progress” is a concept universally pursued, even if that pursuit is materially different across time and place. Theorist Yuk Hui, for example, uses the scene of 540 synchronized dancing robots at China’s 2016 Spring Festival gala as an example of the concept of European modernity being extended to China—a country that has come to be one of the major symbols of the promulgation of technological progress as a measure of modernity. Yet he also argues that “*In China, technics in the sense we understand it today—or at least as it is defined by certain European philosophers—never existed.* There is a general misconception that all technics are equal, that all skills and artificial products coming from all cultures can be reduced to one thing called ‘technology’. . . . Yet they may not be *perceived* or reflected upon in the same way in different cultures” (Hui 9, emphasis in original). What I will try to explore here, then, is the way that science fiction as a technical object can be both *perceived* and utilized to different ends by different audiences. As a form for envisioning “the” future (and here I use “the” in quotation marks to isolate the question of singularity), science fiction and sinofuturistic visions are uneasy bedfellows, sharing many of the same characteristics and employed, in many ways, for similar ends—but often loaded with very different questions of use and applicability. At stake are not only differing historical and philosophical genealogies, but also ways in which issues of labeling and translation have worked to obscure variations in the concept that remain unmarked. While Darko Suvin characterizes science fiction as a question of estrangement, Yuk Hui argues that the fundamental base terms being considered are not in and of themselves coeval. To say that science fiction is a literature of estrangement may well hold true across time and place, but who is being estranged from what may differ significantly.

In line with Sheldon Lu’s observation that Chinese narrative traditions form the two major political functions of legitimation and delegitimization, both Chinese science fiction and sinofuturism are primarily used, contemporaneously, to legitimate the idea of a singular Chinese future. As these narrative discourses are

invested with ideological functions, we must engage with the terms of discourse and the lexical gap that is made invisible by the fact that we are speaking about forms that have and continue to be perceived differently between the West and China. Without care and nuanced definitional approaches to the “spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives,” as Lawrence Lek defines it, sinofuturist visions collapse trillions of possibilities into a singular hegemony of thought that repurposes yellow peril fears into a monolithic future already seeded with the germs of its own dissolution.

Here, Lydia Liu’s concept of the super-sign is valuable in describing and deconstructing some of the underlying issues at stake in the question of translation between Chinese and English in general and the intra-lingual transference of technological and scientific vocabulary in particular. She describes a super-sign as “not a word but a hetero-cultural signifying chain that crisscrosses the semantic fields of two or more languages simultaneously and makes an impact on the meaning of recognizable verbal units, whether they be indigenous words, loanwords, or any other discrete verbal phenomena that linguists can identify within particular languages or among them” (Liu 13). Note here that she does not use the term “word” to describe what is being affected, but “verbal units”—entire concepts are made meaningful in relation to the meaning imposed by one language on the understanding of that concept in the other. To speak of “science fiction” is not merely to define the word itself, but to recognize along with it the millions, billions, and trillions of associated concepts (Lek’s industrial products, individuals, and veiled narratives) that are already from the outset front-loaded onto sinofuturist visions.

One of the most important aspects of this definition is that it *de facto* requires more than one linguistic and cultural system in order to emerge. Just as a German-born London-based artist of Malaysian Chinese descent and a Scottish musician articulated the concept of sinofuturism to a Chinese audience through a translator,¹ the idea of a projected future is a projection made legible through interlingual and intercultural signification. Interlingual translation cannot by itself complete the process of verbal signification because a super-sign requires signification and deferment of “correct” meaning to a foreign language in order to define a native term. Liu herself very convincingly illustrates this concept with the hetero-linguistic sign “夷/i/barbarian,” (Liu 33) but we also see its emergence with the concept of science fiction generally and sinofuturist science fiction more specifically.

My point here is not to go into historical translation theory; rather, it is to use this illustration as an example of what is at stake when we talk about “science fiction” as if it is necessarily commensurate with the Chinese conception of “科幻小说” or *kehuan xiaoshuo*, the Chinese term typically translated as “science fiction.” So, too, does the idea of “sinofuturism” emerge from a moment of definitional power disjunction, in which the concept of “Chineseness” is discussed as ostensibly aspirational while the power to define it is retained by the hegemonic cultural and linguistic field against which it shapes itself. For both science fiction and sinofuturism, this interplay is a double-edged sword; used by the West to other and separate while simultaneously used by national interests and agents to define and self-promote, all in the name of attempting to identify something intrinsic and ontologically flattening that is ultimately always externally imposed. This danger is particularly great because despite its interaction with and development alongside other histories of literature, science fiction as a genre *was* originally a foreign literary import to China, and it is through its interactions with previously existing Chinese forms (histories, socialist realist visions, “strange stories,” etc.), intersection with changing internal epistemologies, appropriation as a tool of state pedagogy, and role in the radical revolutionizing of the Chinese language at the start of the 20th century that it has come to be understood in its current form. An assessment of the cross-lingual translation of terms and the methods by which certain signs are equated with other signs both in and between lexical significations allows us to understand that the question of what we mean when we say “Chinese science fiction” itself begs investigation.

In the last few years, multiple Chinese SF authors have been put in the position of trying to explain what Chinese SF is at all. The end of Ken Liu’s edited collection *Invisible Planets* (2016) includes no fewer than three essays by contemporary titans of the genre (Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan, and Xia Jia) outlining what Chinese SF is and what it is trying to accomplish. Who are they speaking to? A Chinese audience, or an international one? Why is it so important that Chinese SF be seen as a genre separate unto itself, and how do the stakes differ for an international audience vs. a domestic one? Such questions of SF are inseparable from the same issues as applied to sinofuturism, which develops a vision of modernity that is inextricable from national development.

The very concept of modernity itself, however, is also a relational one, not only to another language or time but also another place. As the literature that, at

least in its more technical aspects, positions itself as accurately utilizing existing advancements in science and technology to presage a near-future reality, science fiction *is* the literature of modernity. More than that, though, it is positioned by literary scholars as capable of rewriting a past that has already happened. Fredric Jameson famously argued that “The most characteristic science fiction does not seriously attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future of our social system” (Jameson 288), but instead posits the present as the imagined past of the future. Similarly to Suvin’s aforementioned sweeping characterization of science fiction under a universalizing lens, however, this argument conflates disparate historical conditions and flattens them under arguments primarily pertaining to the pervasive effects of production under capitalism. Science fiction as co-constitutive with sinofuturism, however, is more indicative of Winfried Pauleit’s concept of the *photographesomenon*. While the concept of the *photographesomenon* is one more typically associated with visual surveillance, sinofuturist science fiction’s mandate to “view” the immediate future positions it as a more-or-less “objective” literature while investing it with a certain degree of scientific trustworthiness. Even while being recognized as a work of fiction, science fiction being produced in service of a national future is promoted as plausible in a way that other works of fiction are not. In projecting this “objective” image of the future, it embodies the *photographesomenon*—an objective national past becomes always-already written by and understood through the lens of a future still to come. As Pauleit explains, as long as one’s subject (in this case, the national body) is captured by a seemingly-objective surveillance apparatus (here, science fiction posited as speaking for the nation), every story it might once have had in the past is completely divested in retrospect by the future surveillance. So, too, for sinofuturist science fiction literature—unlike Jameson’s description of (Western) science fiction as a future image predicated on extant socio-cultural and technological conditions, in which the present becomes the past to the future, sinofuturist science fiction produces a national literature in which the past is evacuated of contemporary meaning and reinvented by future projections. The past, then, is colonized by the future through its relationship to a future that reinvests it with anachronistic meaning.

As Pauleit also points out, an objective view towards the subject also allows the subject to see themselves as others see them, giving them the means by which to conceive of themselves as a figure that has been created by the mass view. “This production of images is directed towards a ‘future perfect.’ It is a conception of image

that functions via a time loop that is otherwise only familiar to us from science fiction stories. . . . The photographesomenon is already ‘written,’ even if it only constitutes itself as an image in futurity” (Pauleit 469). While it is interesting that, from the outset, he identifies the photographesomenon directly with science fiction, it is equally notable how sinofuturist science fiction itself aligns with this concept. Though it might be anachronistic to use this term (developed as it was only in 2009, and used by the author to refer specifically to video surveillance), sinofuturist science fiction as a genre attempts the same effect: that is, a (seemingly) objective form of observation that reinterprets the past and fixes it temporally by applying to it the outlines, strictures, and necessities of its future development. To surveil something is to control the subject being watched and to imbue it with outside signifiers—thus, for example, the individual being viewed on camera in light of a crime that has already occurred is *post facto* imbued with criminal intent: not because they necessarily had, at the moment of recording, any of those actual characteristics, but because the objectivity of the camera rewrites their story in line with events that occurred in their future. So, too, the individual and their society as they have existed and as they currently exist are reimagined in terms of the future individual/society they will be by a genre that positions itself as the objective arbitrator of future development.

Sinofuturist science fiction as photographesomenon thus thematically positions itself as a uniquely temporal device. As such it is uniquely malleable to the aims of “modernity” and the development of the nation-state, attempting to articulate inchoate anxieties and the possibility of technoscientific resolution. While Wu Dingbo claims that the following characteristics are broadly typical of *Chinese* science fiction: 1) all main characters are scientists and all stories present scientists’ collective aspirations in the form of explorative excursions into an alternate reality; 2) the conflict in these stories always displays the most prominent character of the Chinese scientists: their patriotism and optimism; 3) all stories are set in the near future, and the reader is assured that the fantasy will come true within his or her lifetime; 4) most of the science fiction ideas are based on the natural sciences (Wu xxxvi), these categorizations are not applicable to much of what would be considered science fiction in China’s current literary landscape; even a cursory examination of contemporary science fiction being produced in China today shows significant departures from these categorizations (the enormously popular *Three Body Problem* trilogy, for example, ends thousands of years in the future and is most certainly not an

optimistic portrayal of either human nature or the inherent capacity of the universe for moral compassion). What contemporary Chinese science fiction and sinofuturist theorizing *do* share is a vision of a future that is identifiably shaped by a concept of “Chineseness” that arises out of opposition to a concept of “Western” development. That “Chineseness” can only be defined oppositionally is central to the structure of these future material visions.

As such, there is immense pressure from both within and without to insist on this cohesive identity, though the same impulse that attempts to display “Chineseness” to the world opens this monolithic identity up to critique and divisiveness. SF being produced now attempts to describe a “China” that is recognizably legible as a single entity while also being understandable by a non-Chinese audience, with the predictably simple result that no “Chinese future” can possibly emerge in any fullness or complexity. As long as nation, culture, and polity are conflated into a single entity, and such an entity is posited as a potential alternative to a normative Western futurity, it is necessarily still fractured because it is not cohesive. As an alternative to a hegemonic Western modernity, it must necessarily imply other alternatives; that state-supported literature can itself only insist on a single “Chinese future” is all the more indicative of the meta-fragmentation of paths to futurity implied by the genre itself.

Ultimately, the issue at the heart of both science fiction as a bounded national genre and sinofuturism as a mode of apprehending contemporary society’s headlong rush towards “the” future is control. Specifically, control of the image of the Chinese future. Who controls it? And to what ends? Today, Chinese authors are contending with two separate pulls, both of which can essentially be identified as nationalist forms of narrative control. On one hand, authors are speaking to a domestic audience—one that is still subject to control by literary censors and internal pressure to present a rosy national future. On the other hand, authors writing from China are tasked with the responsibility to “represent” some coherent, cohesive idea of “Chineseness” to an international audience, and, in doing so, potentially flattening disparate identities and ontologies.

One last salient example of the co-imbrication of sinofuturity with science fiction is the 2011 national ban on depictions of time travel, in which the General Bureau of Radio, Film and Television halted time travel dramas. Western media has described the ban as censorship of dissent from the current political state, but national reception

has focused more on its relationship to historical accuracy. This is one more example of the way discourse around China's future (and past, and the depictions of both) are differently defined both internally and externally. So, then, who controls this narrative of the future, and can any discussion of futurity be viable if it is predicated on forgetting (or dismissing) the past? SF like *The Fat Years* and "Olympic Dream" are predicated on this very idea, presenting a successful economic and social future that has necessitated forgetting the past they're built on, while Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream" vs. HKonger slang for dreaming as protesting both imply a future moment at which these separate dreamers will awake. What world (or worlds) they will awaken to will be decided by whoever controls the narrative of dreaming in the present.

Notes

1. As when Lawrence Lek and Steve Goodman (better known as Kode9) explained the concept of Sinofuturism to a Chinese audience at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in 2017.

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